

Is vaping a new addiction?

By Joseph Erban

The current debate concerning electronic cigarette (EC) within public health is whether ECs are healthier and safer than regular cigarettes.

On the one hand Public Health England (PHE) encourages smokers of cigarettes to switch to ECs as a way to eliminate smoking altogether by 2030, while on the other hand both the FDA and the US Surgeon General recently called the current ECS usage among youth and young adults an "epidemic". This can only leave the public confused as to whether vaping is better or worse than smoking.

Much of the confusion depends on which subpopulation one is targeting messages, what sort of messages are relayed and by whom.

For current smokers or those who smoke and also use ECs *already*. i.e., the dual user, PHE message is to switch to ECs because they claim that it reduces the risk associated with cigarette smoking by 95%. It's better to vape than smoke because the vaper eliminates most of the toxicants found in cigarettes. After all, the contemporary cigarette contains over 7000 chemicals including 70 which cause cancers. E-cigarettes, contain nicotine, glycerin, propylene glycol and flavouring, so goes the argument.

On the other hand, the alarm calls come from new data that shows that in Canada and US the prevalence of vapers has skyrocketed in the past year. Presently, about 15% and 20% of youths and young adults in both Canada and US respectively have been vaping in the past 30 days. For the most part these are not smokers who are trying to quit, but *new* vapers who have neither vaped nor smoked in the past.

In Canada the level of smoking has essentially remained stagnant for the past 4 years with only slight diminution, but a recent study from University of Western Ontario actually points to recent increase in smoking cigarettes as well as vaping among young adults.

So why different outcomes where the actual level of smoking in UK has decreased, while in Canada for the last while it has remained stagnant, while youth vaping is increasing.

Such opposite outcomes seems to arise for various reasons. First is the maximum level of nicotine found in UK ECs (21mg/milliliter) which is significantly lower than those popular brands found Canada or US (60mg/milliliter). Second, there is a limit to how these products are marketed in UK, which is covered by European regulations. And third, the public gets messages about ECs from public health, whereas here the majority of messages about ECs originates in social network sites largely from manufacturers of ECs and cigarettes.

The source of messaging and which communities are target by these messages determines, to some degree, outcomes as has been the case historically with cigarettes.

Recall how the tobacco industry created positive safer and healthier images about how menthol and later light filtered cigarettes were smoother, less harsh, implying that they were safer and healthier than regular cigarettes. Of course we now know that this was a way the tobacco industry to deceive the public in responds to reports that cigarette cause cancer.

It took years of government messaging to reverse industry's deceptive and misleading propaganda. Cut to today and the years of seeing smoking of tobacco use dropping in the developed world, the industry re-invents itself as the champion of smoking cessation by introducing their new products, claiming yet again, these products as healthier and safer, even though we cannot, strictly speak, scientifically claim that to be the case.

For example, in Pride Toronto Rothman's, Benson and Hedges Inc., had a booth with the slogan "If you don't smoke, don't start; [I]f you smoke, quit; [I]f you don't quit, change." When you visit their site, the change they refer to is to their new heat not burn products and of course their recent 13 billion dollar investment in Jull, the leading seller of e-cigarettes is where they want you to go. Nowhere did the posted contain the message "If you don't vape, don't start."

Canada recently passed bill S-5, its newly minted Tobacco Act. It bans flavours that intentionally target children, but does not ban flavours outright. The Act also permits advertisement of e-cigarette. Quebec, on the other hand bans all flavours of e-juice, but walk into almost any vape shop in Montreal and you'll find flavours of all sorts. In other words, there is poor enforcement of the law.

The tobacco industry has known for a long time that flavoured tobacco products are appealing to children. This is more the case now when we are seeing skyrocketing increase in adolescents and young adults vaping, many thinking that it is only pleasurable flavours and not realizing that many ECs contain very high dosages of nicotine, a notoriously addictive substance.

After a few trials the initiator can expect to quickly become hooked to nicotine and will require to consume nicotine in one form or another to meet their newly developed addiction.

This is because once you become addicted to nicotine, it must be consumed continuously, otherwise the nicotine addict may experience withdrawal symptoms, such as: irritability, increase anger and agitation, fatigue, insomnia, depression, anxiety, loss of concentration and intense craving to want to vape. Since these can last for weeks, they can only be relieved by continuous consumption of nicotine in one form or another. The addict now become the new slave of the tobacco industry, with their false message that vaping is healthier and safer.

The message concerning e-cigarette that we ought to be sending to our children is:

**If you don't vape, don't start;
If you smoke, get help and quit;
And if you vape, also get help and quit;**

For those who are smokers, there are ways that you can quit smoking without vaping that does not place the quitter at substituting one addiction for another and having to then quit that yet again.

It now appears that unless public health realizes that we are seeing the emergence of a tobacco-industry led new vaping epidemic and quickly come up with warning messages to youngsters, we will witness the next class of young vaping addicts, beholden, yet again to the tobacco industry. Unfortunately those public warning messages have thus far been meagre.